DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 128 885 EA 008 655

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TITLE Administrative Response to Conflict.
INSTITUTION Tri-State Area School Study Council, Pittsburgh, Pa.
PUB DATE 72
NOTE 23p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Role; Board of Education Role; *Conflict; *Conflict Resolution; *Educational Administration; Elementary Secondary Education; Leadership Styles; *Organizational Climate

ABSTRACT

Enduring resolution of conflict is not so much the result of clever tricks as of the state of mind of superintendents, school boards, teachers, students, and citizens and of the organizational climate of the schools and the community. It is important to view conflict in neutral terms, realizing that conflict may be good or bad. Effective administrators can accept conflict and capitalize on it to move the organization forward more rapidly. Many of the more difficult conflicts arise from goal ambiguity; by reducing goal ambiguity we can reduce many of the conflicts that arise over means. The classic outcomes of conflict are avoidance, deadlock, victory/defeat, compromise, and integration. Of these, integration is probably the least common but most effective over the long run. Organizational climate appears to predispose an organization toward productive conflict or destructive conflict, and the administrator significantly influences this climate by his administrative style and values. (Author/JG)

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# ADMINISTRATIVE RESPONSE TO CONFLICT

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1972

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EA 008 655

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# SOME PERSPECTIVE

"No recent year has seen such wholesale changes in the superintendencies and other high school positions as the present year . . . . There has been a perfect storm of unrest culminating in wholesale resignations, dismissals, and new appointments." The quotation is from the *American School Board Journal* — the June *1913* issue!

Public administrators have been caught in the crossfire of social conflict since before the assassination of Caesar. Although its intensity rises and wanes with time and place, conflict is ubiquitous in public affairs and right now it is certainly not waning in the beleaguered world of the school administrator.

The recent study by the American Association of School Administrators, *The American School Superintendent*, reveals that the issue most likely to cause superintendents to leave the field is "attacks on superintendents." Some will no doubt become professors of education and teach others how to do it; others will retire prematurely. Many of the superintendents who responded to the study said that they needed "skills in conflict resolution" if they were to maintain their effectiveness as administrators. Such skills are rather hard to come by. We know much more about the causes of social conflict than we know about the cures. Judge Learned Hand observed that "justice is the tolerable accommodation of the conflicting interests of society, and I don't believe there is any royal road to attain such accommodations concretely."

Justice Hand's admonition notwithstanding, here goes. No royal road is promised, only a rather simplistic review of some concepts relative to conflict which seem to be useful to the school administrator.

We will start with some platitudes about conflict, then analyze the nature of conflicts, weigh the various outcomes of conflict, consider the relationship of the organizational climate of the school to productive-conflict and destructive-conflict organizations, and review our knowledge of the relationship of the board of education and the administrator to productive-conflict and destructive-conflict schools. With a little bit of luck, we may uncover some practical advice on how to strengthen the conflict profile in our schools.

Let us consider some of the platitudes that are familiar to all commencement speakers.

*Conflict should be viewed in neutral rather than hostile terms.* Mary Parker Follett defined conflict neatly and dispassionately as "a moment of interacting desires." This definition permits us to view conflict without connotations of "good" or "bad" and to realize that conflict becomes good or bad only as a consequence of the level of civilization which people bring with their interacting desires, and the statesmanship of administrators and others who attempt to mediate these interacting desires. In other words, the administrator who views conflict as inherently pathological, something to be avoided or muted, is in trouble right from the start. He is likely to become part of the problem rather than a force in its solution. Many scholars of organizational science have pointed out that conflict and cooperation are inextricably intertwined in the life of any organization.[1] To state that cooperation is essential to any organization is tautological. Thus, if conflict and cooperation are two reciprocal processes or, as some have put it, two sides of the same coin, one might reason that some

1 Charles H. Cooley, *Social Process*, New York: Scribner's Sons, 1918, p. 39 f.

conflict must then be necessary in any viable organization. Seemingly nobody has determined how much conflict is enough. So it is not suggested that the superintendent rush out and hire Abbie Hoffman and Jane Fonda to his administrative staff. It is suggested that the compelling challenge to school administrators is to mobilize the inevitable forces of conflict to generate the ensuing cooperation that is essential for progress.

*Impetus for improvement of institutions is accelerated during periods of social turbulence.* Almost every commencement speaker assures us that if it is a time of great turmoil then it must also be a time of great opportunity. The evidence of history is on their side. As Alfred North Whitehead observed, "The clash of doctrines is not a disaster, it is an opportunity." Most of man's advances have been achieved during periods of conflict. The examples are legion. Every new program of federal support for education has been enacted during periods of war, depression, social unrest, international tensions, or other dislocations. The Morrill Act, which contributed so much to the democratization of higher education, was enacted during the darkest days of the Civil War. The GI Bill was enacted in the midst of World War II. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act would never have passed without the conflict arising from poverty and social injustices. And so it goes. We do not say that all social progress results from conflict nor that all conflict produces social progress. But conflict does present educational leaders with far more leverage for the improvement of the educational enterprise than they would find in periods of tranquility. Although ground may be lost on some fronts, the gains should outrun the losses in any well-administered school system.

*Periods of conflict often permit the leader to exercise high statesmanship.* This, of course, is a corollary of the above. George Bernard Shaw said that "the test of a man or woman's breeding is how they behave in a quarrel." Just as the ship's captain demonstrates his greatest skill in rough waters, so school administrators face the most bracing exercise of their skill in times of turbulence. Think of the great presidents of this country, or the great school administrators, and they are likely to be persons whose tenure spanned very difficult times. This is not to say that great leadership capacity never exists in time of serenity but rather that these times do not permit leadership to reach its apogee. Heroics are virtually impossible without danger.

*Conflict may leave an organization stronger than before, depending upon the degree of wisdom and justice applied to the resolution of the conflict.* The destructive consequences of conflict are well known; the productive consequences are not. Just as a sufficiently deep personality conflict within the individual can destroy his ability to function, so a deep and protracted conflict within any organization can result in some destruction of the organization. We have all witnessed in some school systems the creeping paralysis that follows deadlock in conflict. But modern administrative science recognizes the productive potentialities of conflict. Coser wrote an entire book, *The Functions of Social Conflict*, and pointed out that some of these functions are essential to the wholesome development of any organization. Among these were the cathartic effect of releasing pent-up hostilities, relieving divisive forces and re-establishing unity, helping to define group structure, and refining organizational objectives and policies. All lovers are aware of the euphoria that inevitably follows a patched-up quarrel. Rational conflict forces reexamination of old dogma, reconsideration of goals, collection and evaluation of new evidence, and consideration of new alternatives. These are the processes by which a free society and its insti-

tutions are strengthened. It is said that Franklin Roosevelt deliberately created a "web of tensions" among his subordinates to release the creativity and the motivation among them which Roosevelt believed to be the lifeblood of a successful administration. Perhaps he had read Mary Parker Follett's observation that "we can set conflict to work and make it do something for us." The sociopsychological climate, as we shall see later, can be improved through conflict. To the extent that conflict is intelligently approached and fairly resolved, it may remove irritants, reduce misunderstanding, reinforce goals, quicken commitment, establish individual and organizational integrity, and otherwise refine the attributes of wholesome organizational climate. So it is not the conflict itself which should be alarming but rather its mismanagement.

## THE ANATOMY OF CONFLICT

The administrator must recognize that conflict comes in many types, which must be distinguished if they are to be dealt with effectively.

*Constructive v. nefarious attacks*

First there is the obvious difference between conflict generated by responsible, constructive reformers and the conflict generated by nefarious critics whose mission is to destroy rather than improve schools. Some administrators make the serious mistake of treating them both alike. Fortunately it is usually rather easy to distinguish between the two. The constructive critics ask questions, try to understand positions other than their own, search for truth through study and fact-finding, work through the superintendent and the board, and use rational and objective language. If constructive critics are treated by administrators as subversive, they may indeed become so. Subversive agitators prefer to attack people along with issues, use hateful language, go directly to the public rather than work within the system, issue dogmatic statements rather than questions, hold inflexible positions, claim to have all the facts they need, threaten disruption, and inveigh against the conspiracy which they see behind all opposition. Any standard reference work on guerrilla warfare will be helpful in dealing with subversives. Radical critics may claim lofty motives while at the same time employing guerrilla tactics. Regardless of their motives, if they proclaim that they must first destroy the system, they must be dealt with like the subversives they are in deed, notwithstanding their proclaimed idealism. No public administrator can responsibly preside over the destruction of a public institution he is obliged to maintain. Fortunately the subversives are usually relatively few in number and, generally speaking, unable to generate little currency for their goals among most school communities if certain circumstances prevail.

However, it is crucial to consider some of these circumstances under which any minority — radical or otherwise — can mobilize the silent majority to action. James Coleman, who has spent much of his career studying conflict, identifies the three circumstances necessary for the conversion of the mass of relatively uninformed and ordinarily apathetic majority to the banners of a minority. First, there must be several discontented

minorities irritated enough by several unresolved and festering cleavages that they can be mobilized into a coalition united in its desire to "throw the rascals out." Second, a national climate of fear and suspicion over some pervasive issues, such as race relations or the threat of communist conspiracy, among others, helps to exacerbate the conflict. Third, the conflict can become uncontrollable if the administration has failed to maintain close and continued good relations within the organization and with community organizations.[2] Coleman believes that all these ingredients are essential; others are not so sure that all of them are essential. Coleman speaks of "Gresham's Law of Conflict" in which "the harmful and dangerous elements drive out those which would keep the conflict within bounds."[3] As the conflict escalates, there is an increasing reliance on power and the tactics of threat, coercion, and deception. Within each of the conflicting parties there is increasing pressure for conformity of opinion and a tendency for leadership to be pre-empted from the conciliators by the intransigents. Thinking becomes polarized and the antagonists come to view the alternatives as being limited to victory or defeat.

### *Goal conflicts*

Getzels and associates have identified several general categories of conflict derived from their model of educational administration as a social process, which we shall oversimplify and paraphrase here as organizational goal conflicts, individual personality conflicts, and individual-organization conflicts.[4] One need not have a Ph.D. to understand that there is wide disagreement in society regarding the goals which schools should undertake. Illustrations of this kind of conflict are legion. Some people would like to see students bused as necessary in order to achieve racial balance in the schools, while others would not. This issue is so pervasive that it is very much a part of the national political debate. Some people would like to have sex education in the schools, while others are sure that sex education is the work of the communists or the devil. And so it goes. The list of issues is long and passions can run high, filling a school auditorium with wild debate at a moment's notice.

Since institutional goal conflicts are nearly always a microcosm of the value conflicts of society itself, the school administrator has very limited leverage in resolving these conflicts in any very fundamental way. Although some school administrators have managed to achieve some tranquility on the busing issue, for example, they know that, as long as this issue is fundamentally unresolved in the larger society, tranquility can be lost at almost any moment. The forces that sustain these goal conflicts are often so external and so powerful that the school administrator may be limited in his ability to cope with them. At the very least he should maintain communication among the opposing groups and bargain out compromise agreements that permit schools to operate under a kind of armed truce until higher authority is capable of resolving the issue. Better yet, he should try to make the compromise work, experiment with creative alternatives that forge ahead, if even in limited ways, toward the ultimate objective. As a responsible public servant he cannot in good conscience cop out on moral issues. As an educator, he is ethically obliged

2 James S. Coleman, *Community Conflict*, Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1957, pp. 7-8.
3 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
4 Jacob W. Getzels, James M. Lipham, and Roald F. Campbell, *Educational Administration as a Social Process*, New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1968, pp. 108-119.

to raise the level of public understanding and response to the great social issues of the times.

### *Individual personality conflicts*

Personality conflicts may be manifested within a single individual or among individuals. For example, I may want to be treated equally with others, but I may also want to have my individuality recognized and accommodated. But how can I be treated both equally and individually? When my own personal needs are in conflict I may irritate the boss with problems that are more in the domain of my psychiatrist than the domain of the boss. About all that the boss can hope for, if my conflicts are too severe, is that I have a good analyst or that the grievance machinery is well greased or that I will get promoted to a principalship in someone else's school system.

### *Individual-organization conflicts*

We come now to the third family of conflicts, which is the nature of most conflicts which administrators must deal with on a day-to-day basis. This is the conflict between the individual(s) and the expectations or goals of the organization. We focus on this family of conflicts particularly for two reasons: first, it is a very common kind of conflict in schools and, second, unlike the other two, the school administrator is in much better position to mediate this type of conflict. This collision between the individual(s) and the organization represents the classic conflict that permeates so much of human experience. It has not only drawn the attention of great scholars of administrative science, notably Weber, Argyris, Getzels, Thompson, and Presthus, among others, but has also become the classic theme in so many great works of literature. In *Up the Down Staircase,* it was a very humane English teacher struggling against inhumane secondary school administration. In *The Godfather,* it was the struggle of the godfather's youngest son against the Mafia tradition of his family which finally ensnared him. In *All Quiet on the Western Front,* it was the destruction of a sensitive young German soldier by the Prussian military machine. In *Jonathan Livingston Seagull,* it was the struggle of a creative young seagull against the oppressive orthodoxy of the seagull "establishment." Examples of this endemic conflict between the individual and the organization are legion, both in fiction and in nonfiction, as indeed it is in real life. This collision between the goals of the organization and the needs of the individual or individuals is the type of conflict that we shall be focusing upon largely in the discussion which follows. This is the kind of conflict that is so often manifested when teachers strike, when parents boycott schools, when students demonstrate, or when grievances are filed, although, of course, this conflict may have overtones of either of the other two families of conflict.

# ANATOMY OF THE OUTCOMES OF CONFLICT

We turn now to consideration of the classic outcomes of conflict: avoidance, deadlock, victory-defeat, compromise, and integration. The first four are well known; the last one, generally the most preferable, is less well known. Bertram Gross, in his book *The Managing of Organizations*, provides an excellent analysis of the strengths and limitations of each of these outcomes, from which the following material is abridged.[5]

### *Avoidance*

Avoidance is a necessary response to some kinds of conflict in certain circumstances. The divergence of interests among individuals and between the organization and individuals is often so great that it is highly doubtful whether schools or other social systems could exist without some forms of avoidance or suppression of conflict. In fact, withdrawal from conflict seems to be one of man's most natural and traditional ways of coping with certain conflicts. Internal conflicts may be either consciously or unconsciously repressed. External conflicts may be reduced by rearranging the situation so that antagonists may avoid each other. A student in constant difficulty with one teacher may be transferred to another teacher. Teachers may be granted transfers to other schools to escape principals with whom they can't get along. However, attempts at avoidance of conflict are often counterproductive when administrators attempt to avoid very ripe irritations with the hope that they will go away if ignored. Today's collective bargaining and grievance procedures in schools are making it increasingly impossible for administrators to ignore incipient conflict within the teaching ranks. However, students do not yet enjoy easy response to administrators' attempts to avoid the resolution of their problems. School problems exacerbated by administrators' attempts to avoid them are legion. Clearly the option of avoiding conflict by ignoring root problems is one that the school administrator should use with great prudence. On the other hand, the avoidance of conflict by solving incipient problems before they erupt is part of the genius of administration.

### *Deadlock*

Deadlock is another common outcome of conflict. Like avoidance, deadlock may be regarded as such a negative state that it may be intolerable. In deadlock, neither side wins and both sides are frustrated. Some conflict, like the Vietnam war and some marriages, can continue in deadlock for a long period of time. Deadlock can be accepted only when the dangers of defeat make a stalemate more palatable. When the power of the conflicting parties is approximately equal and when the issue is a zero-sum issue, peace through stalemate may be more acceptable to the conflicting parties than is peace through mutual exhaustion. Also, a stalemate may provide both sides with breathing space through which they can mobilize for renewed conflict. Deadlock then

5 Bertram M. Gross, *The Managing of Organizations*, Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1964, vol. 1, pp. 274-279.

may be viewed as an outcome of conflict but seldom as a resolution of conflict.

*Victory-defeat*

Victory and defeat are common outcomes of conflict, especially in zero-sum issues. By zero-sum issues, we mean issues in which one side's gain must be the other side's loss. If teachers are to get a raise, then taxes must go up. If one vice-principal is promoted to the principalship, then another vice-principal cannot be. The victory-defeat outcome is the neatest and most unambiguous of them all. The issue is clearly and decisively resolved, and administrators, like most of society, rather like decisiveness. We are well acculturated to accept majority votes, guilty or acquittal decisions, arbitration awards, referees' decisions, or school board resolutions as binding. Zero-sum issues can hardly be resolved by any outcome other than victory-defeat or compromise. However, victory-defeat is also the most circumscribed form of outcome and therefore usually the least desirable outcome for losers whose loss is total, and losers, like the Germans in World War I, have been known to come back to the fray again another day with renewed vigor.

*Compromise*

This outcome is familiar to anyone who has observed the collective bargaining process. It too has lots of allure, since each party to the conflict wins something and loses something. As every negotiator knows, compromise requires people to behave deceptively. You demand more than you expect or merit so that you have room to compromise without losing too much. You issue ultimatums and threats that you have no intention of executing. You deliberately obfuscate data and confuse communication. Compromising behavior is deliberately deceptive and is seen by idealists as unmitigated evil. It requires a kind of behavior that is really alien to most educators. The most effective negotiators often appear to be the most unprincipled people. Gross argues that overindulgence in compromise may lead to erosion of moral values. Compromise often results in temporizing, since the contenders renew later the demands that were lost in compromise earlier. The people who really profit from compromise are the professional negotiators, the fact-finders, and the mediators. But we emphasize again that compromise and victory-defeat may be the only available outcomes when zero-sum issues are at stake.

*Integration*

Integration is the least known, least practiced, yet usually the most effective and enduring outcome of conflict. It is the outcome which offers the most hope for permanent solution. We are indebted to Mary Parker Follett for first explicating this outcome.[6] Integration can probably be best understood through illustration. The Faculty Council in a professional school of a university was attempting to establish the parameters of faculty participation in the governance of the school. Administration insisted that the Faculty Council's role should be that of "making recommendations" to the administration. The faculty found this objectionable because of the generally poor record of ad-

6 Henry C. Metcalf and L. Urwick (eds.), *Dynamic Administration: The Collected Papers of Mary Parker Follett*, New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1940, pp. 30-49.

visory bodies to administrative powers. Like most faculties, they were not enchanted by a "meet and discuss" mode of participation. Administration, on the other hand, rejected the demand that faculty should "approve" programs, policies, and budgets. Both parties then backed away from the objectionable words and began exploring instead the procedures by which faculty might participate in the actual decision-making processes without preempting administrative prerogatives, while at the same time requiring executive accountability for departures from faculty preferences in these matters. Both faculty and administration discovered after a lot of discussion that they could describe the processes by which both faculty and administration could participate in the decision-making process without compromising the expectations of either side. The Faculty Council's charter now defines those processes and avoids the words "recommendations" and "approval." Both faculty and administration are happy with the agreement.

Integration is then the most fundamentally satisfying mode of conflict resolution for all parties. It produces the most enduring settlements. It is at the same time the most difficult mode of resolution in most cases. Why is it difficult? Each party must trust the other. Each party must strive hard to understand and accommodate the other side. Each party must struggle to get behind the symbols that hide the true state of affairs and bring the fundamental issues at conflict into the open so that underlying interests can be analyzed forthrightly. Hidden agendas must come out of hiding. This process is akin to the "working through" process in psychoanalysis. It requires repeated exploration for new and usually more complex and creative solutions that can satisfy both sides as fully as possible. It often produces solutions that are more difficult to administer than those decisions that are yielded by victory-defeat or by compromise. Barnard referred to this outcome as "moral creativity." A large measure of inventiveness is required and that takes time, patience, and wisdom. But the outcome is usually worth it because both parties are satisfied and often exhilarated by the solution. As Follett pointed out, the process of integrating divergent interests is an essential part of developing an organization's power. The total power which an organization energizes through integration is usually much greater than the power that the organization gains either through compromise or victory-defeat. We have learned from our studies of organizational behavior that organizational power is not a fixed sum that must be won or lost but, with integration, a variable sum in which all can gain. That is why the term collective gaining is sometimes associated with integration.[7] It is indeed possible for all parties to gain power in this mode. But this is an uncommon concept that is neither well understood nor well pursued by most conflicting parties.

It should be remembered, however, that integration, like power, is a sword that can cut in any direction. It can unite the forces of the devil as well as the angels. Whether any specific integration is to be regarded as good or evil must, like any other outcome of conflict, be determined entirely by one's ethical premises.

As noted earlier, not all conflicts can be resolved through integration. However, many more conflicts in our society could be solved through integration than is presently the case. Much of the genius of school administration lies in distinguishing clearly between those issues that are amenable to resolution through integration and those which are not, and then maximizing the oppor-

7 Richard Wynn, "Collective Gaining," *Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 51 (April, 1970), pp. 415-419.

tunities to solve all those that are amenable to integration in that manner. Unfortunately, our present preoccupation with collective bargaining militates against this stratagem. Let us analyze the various types of dilemmas to deepen our understanding of those which are amenable to integration and those which are not.

Figure 1 helps us sort out dilemmas and make some important distinctions between those sources of conflict which can be resolved through integration and those which cannot.

FIGURE 1. Dilemmas and Their Amenability to Resolution by Integration or Victory-Defeat and Compromise

| | ISSUES:<br>quantitative<br>fixed-sum<br>win-lose choices | PROBLEMS:<br>qualitative<br>variable-sum<br>mutual gain choices |
|---|---|---|
| WELFARE GOALS<br>satisfied through remunerative power<br>resulting in calculative involvement | I<br>High victory-defeat potential<br><br>Low integrative potential<br><br>Examples:<br>parochiaid<br>across-the-board salary increases | II<br>Moderate victory-defeat potential<br><br>Moderate integrative potential<br><br>Examples:<br>differentiated salaries<br>faculty promotions |
| CULTURAL GOALS<br>satisfied through normative power<br>resulting in moral involvement | III<br><br>Moderate victory-defeat potential<br>Moderate integrative potential<br><br>Examples:<br>racial balance through busing<br>sex education | IV<br><br>Low victory-defeat potential<br>High integrative potential<br><br>Examples:<br>student government<br>curriculum development |

Walton and McKersie distinguish between conflicts that involve zero-sum or fixed-sum issues and those which involve variable-sum issues.[8] Fixed-sum issues, shown in the middle vertical column, are those which force win-lose or victory-defeat options only. They tend to be the big money issues and those in which the stakes are fundamentally quantitative. In contrast, conflicts may arise also from problems which are qualitative rather than quantitative in nature. These tend to be variable-sum problems and are represented here with

8 Richard E. Walton and Robert B. McKersie, *A Behavioral Theory of Labor Negotiations*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965.

some examples in the right column. Etzioni classifies sources of conflict in another way.[9] He distinguishes between welfare goals, represented here in the top horizontal column, and cultural goals, represented here in the bottom horizontal column. The welfare goals have to do largely with the welfare of employees or clients of an organization and invoke largely remunerative power or personal rights and privileges. In contrast, cultural goals involve cultural or moral interests and are satisfied through normative power.

By combining Etzioni's analysis and Walton and McKersie's analysis in this four-way grid, we are able to consider them together. Etzioni suggests that the cultural goals may lend themselves rather well to resolution through integrative decision-making, whereas the welfare goals do not. Walton and McKersie suggests that the variable-sum problems usually lend themselves rather well to resolution through integrative decision-making, whereas the fixed-sum issues do not. This permits us to reason that the kinds of problems found in cell I are not very compatible with integrative conflict resolution, either by Etzioni's or Walton and McKersie's analysis. These are the real tough conflict issues that must probably be hammered out through an adversary bargaining process and find their solution either through victory-defeat or compromise. By contrast, the kinds of conflicts illustrated in cell IV lend themselves either way to resolution through integrative decision-making. In fact, one could argue that it is probably uncivilized to attempt to solve the kinds of problems that fall in cell IV in the collective bargaining mode, since that style of conflict resolution tends to force us into victory-defeat or compromise outcomes, which usually fail to give us the creative and mutual gain solutions that integrative conflict resolution permits. Cells II and III include potential conflicts, which by one analysis appear compatible with integrative resolution but not so with respect to the other. These may be thought of as "mixed issues." In sum, we can raise the level of civilization in conflict resolution by applying the integrative mode to as many problems as possible.

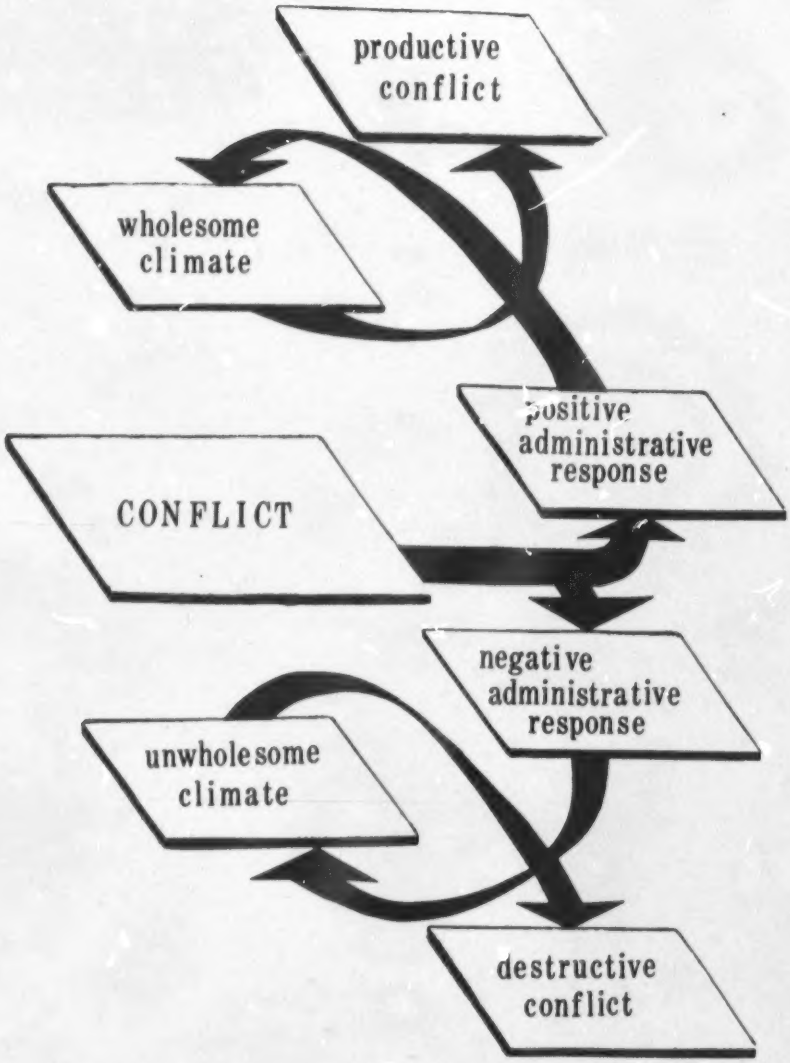
# ANATOMY OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE

The relationship between conflict, administrative response, and organizational climate is illustrated in Figure 2. When conflict arises, administrators respond either positively or negatively. This administrative response then helps to shape the organizational climate either wholesomely or unwholesomely. This organizational climate then predisposes the school system toward either productive or destructive conflict syndromes when successive conflict occurs. The illustration is oversimplified since other factors, such as the response of teachers, students, and community, also help to shape the organizational climate.

A number of scholars have studied organization health. Miles speaks of organization health as the ability to "survive in its environment . . . . [and] to

9 Amitai Etzioni, *A Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations*, New York: The Free Press, 1961.

FIGURE 2. Conflict — Administrative Response — Climate — Conflict Spiral



cope adequately over the long haul." [10] Miles specifies ten dimensions of organization health which, it seems plausible to assume, would help to distinguish the productive-conflict schools from the destructive-conflict schools. By productive-conflict schools, we mean, not those without conflict, but rather those which are capable of coping with conflict by making it operate for the improvement of the organization.

First, Miles tells us that healthy organizations have rather clear *goal focus*, as opposed to those organizations which suffer from role ambiguity. Healthy organizations are engaged in vigorous effort to define both appropriate and achievable goals and to help people within the organization to understand and accept those goals. Much of the conflict which beleaguers schools arises over various *means*, and this conflict over means cannot be resolved until some consensus is reached with respect to goals. How do you feel about career education? Open education? Differentiated staffing? PPBES systems? Voucher plans? Performance contracting? These are all *means* which cannot really be considered sensibly until one has first reduced the dispute over goals. Several scholars have called attention to bureaucracies' tendencies to substitute consideration of means for consideration of goals and thereby encounter irreducible disputes. Whether or not means are acceptable is undeterminable until goals have been established and recognized. Fortunately some helpful tools are beginning to emerge to help us with the task of clarifying goals. The Pennsylvania Quality Education Project is one example of an effort to help schools clarify their goals in behavioral and measurable terms, rather than in the somewhat useless platitudes that once characterized the statements of educational philosophy that most schools formulate and then ignore. Management-by-objectives systems force attention upon management goals. PPBES systems also force us to confront the matter of goals before we tackle programs, policies, budgets, and evaluation. Indeed any evaluation system should require clarification of goals. Goal clarification, though not always simple, is nevertheless essential. Man has been in dispute over the goals of education ever since schools have existed.

Second, Miles emphasizes the importance of *communication adequacy* in organization health. Feeding more information to opposing parties is no guarantee that they will interact more lovingly, but to be ignorant of the problem or the opponent's expectations is often an impossible handicap in problem-solving. One of the great dysfunctions of the collective bargaining process is that both sides typically obfuscate communications and withhold information from each other deliberately. These tactics may help us progress toward victory-defeat, compromise, or stalemate, but can only hinder integrative conflict resolution. The importance of adequate communication and the organizational pathologies that arise from inadequate communication are so well known that we need not belabor them here.

Third, Miles speaks of the importance of *optimum power equalization*. Simply stated, this concept suggests that unequal power distribution predisposes us toward solution by victory-defeat or compromise and that real integration is unlikely when one party to the conflict holds disproportionate power over the other. It is usually impossible to resolve fundamental conflict

10 Matthew B. Miles, "Planned Change and Organizational Health: Figure and Ground," in Richard O. Carlson *et al.* (eds.), *Change Processes in the Public Schools*, Eugene, Oregon: Center for the Advanced Study of Educational Administration, 1965, Chapter 2.

with any justice when one party is holding a pistol to the head of the other. This circumstance usually destroys the opportunity for cooperation and often brings losses to both parties. Collective bargaining and grievance procedures appeal to teachers because they appear as stratagems toward power equalization with administrators and boards of education, which of course they are. But to the extent that bargaining or any other device upsets too far the balance of power between employers and employees, or between administrators and teachers, or between the layman and the professional, they tend to be self-defeating. Some scholars speak of power equalization in terms of organizational equilibrium. They tend to consider the maintenance of equilibrium as an essential characteristic of productive-conflict organizations.

Fourth, Miles speaks of *resource utilization* as an essential attribute of organizational health. He tells us that conflict is exacerbated when any group of people in an organization are either overloaded or idling, or when either party to the conflict is subject to unusually heavy pressures toward accommodation. As an illustration, one of the great sources of discontent among blacks in efforts to achieve racial balance in schools is that it is the black children who must usually be bused in greater numbers out of their neighborhoods into white schools, rather than the other way around. Destructive-conflict schools would force students to accommodate toward teachers and administrators more often than teachers and administrators are forced to accommodate toward students. In destructive-conflict schools, school boards would press teachers to do most of the accommodating or teachers would force boards to do most of the accommodating.

Fifth, Miles identifies *cohesiveness* as an essential characteristic of healthy organizations. Cohesiveness means the extent to which participants like the organization and want to remain in it and to influence it collaboratively. Cohesiveness is closely related to *morale*, the sixth characteristic that Miles treats. If an organization is cohesive and morale is high, people will work hard to solve the problems of the organization that they really care about. If the organization is not cohesive, morale tends to be low, and people can find satisfaction in immobilizing or destroying the organization. Miles does not suggest that cohesive organizations do not have conflict. Indeed, cohesive organizations may have a high incidence of overt conflict. But they also have a higher tolerance for conflict because they are confident that this conflict will not destroy the organization and can therefore be used constructively. In other words, cohesive organizations welcome conflict because they are confident that they can make it work for the good of the organization. Deutsch speaks of this characteristic as "optimal motivation," meaning "an alert readiness to be dissatisfied with things as they are and a freedom to confront one's environment without excessive fear, combined with a confidence in one's capabilities to persist in the face of obstacles." [11]

Seventh, Miles considers *innovativeness* and its relationship to organization health. He defines this as the capability of the organization to invent new procedures, work toward new goals, and become more differentiated. The innovative organization has greater capacity for change and therefore for conflict resolution than does the inflexible organization. As noted earlier, the capability for innovativeness is essential to the integrative mode of conflict

11 Morton Deutsch, "Conflicts: Productive and Destructive," *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 25 (January, 1969), p. 21.

resolution. The classical studies of organizations always reveal that the corporations, the public agencies, the armies, indeed even the nations that survive and prosper are those that are capable of changing to accommodate new circumstances and new expectations.

Eighth, Miles emphasizes the importance of *autonomy* in organization health. Autonomy refers to the extent to which the interactions between the organization and its external environment are reciprocal rather than servile. The healthy school system, for example, is neither the master nor the slave of its constituency. If teachers, or administrators, or the board seek to usurp power at the expense of the community, which provides both the resources and the clients, they are in for trouble. Let's face it, what is good for teachers or good for the board or good for administrators is not necessarily good for the public. Carlson draws a distinction between "domesticated organizations," such as schools, and "wild organizations," such as boys' camps.[12] Domesticated organizations enroll clients who are not free to accept or reject the service. These organizations are protected and cared for by society and need not struggle with competition for survival; they endure far less pressure from society for change than do wild organizations. According to Carlson, domesticated organizations are able, within certain financial and legal constraints, to impose their goals and values upon their clients. It is exactly this concern for the unresponsiveness of the schools in their public monopolistic position that tempts some people to advocate voucher systems as a means of transforming these domestic organizations into wild organizations. Miles seems to suggest that neither wild organizations, which are the servants of the external society, nor domesticated organizations, which are to some degree the masters of society, are well adapted to productive-conflict profile. Presumably we need to find ways in which the relationship between the professional educator and the school patron, and between the school organization and the community can become more reciprocal and power equalized. One of the serious limitations of the collective bargaining mode as a means of conflict resolution is that it is bilateral between the employer and employee. Certainly the board is expected to represent the public, but this has serious limitations operationally. Autonomy then is fostered to the extent that provision can be made for meaningful reciprocity between the organization and its external environment. Coleman in his studies found this to be an important characteristic of productive-conflict schools.[13] Some of the practical devices for accomplishing this school-community reciprocity include school advisory councils comprising faculty, administration, school board, citizens, and students; parent-teacher conferences; among others.

Ninth, Miles identifies *adaptation* as another attribute of the healthy organization. This characteristic refers to the organization's realistic and effective contact with its surroundings and the capability of both the organization and the community to become different as a result of their interaction. Inherent in the concept of adaptation is the organization's ability to bring about corrective change in itself faster than the change occurring in the surrounding environment.

Finally, Miles speaks of *problem-solving adequacy* in organization health. This refers to the school's capability of sensing problems and dealing with them openly and with minimum strain and energy so that they stay solved. The

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12 Richard O. Carlson *et al.* (ed.), *op. cit.*, Chapter 1.
13 James S. Coleman, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-9.

productive-conflict organization gains strength and credibility through its repeated use and improvement of its problem-solving machinery. Some people speak of this as the institutionalization of conflict management. This problem-solving machinery includes administrative councils, ombudsmen, collective bargaining, and most especially grievance procedures. These are all mediating mechanisms that seem to be essential to productive-conflict organizations. Well-run grievance procedures can help to make both administrators and teachers more accountable by institutionalizing within certain guidelines the school's problem-solving machinery. It is related to the concept of due process.

Argyris adds another very important characteristic of organization health, an *atmosphere of mutual trust*.[14] This reciprocal trust is essential in productive-conflict organizations. Both administrators and employees must feel free to expose the shortcomings of the organization without threat of reprisals or charges of disloyalty or unprofessional conduct.

## ANATOMY OF PRODUCTIVE CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Deutsch, drawing upon the work of Stein, notes that scholars who have studied productive conflict resolution have discovered a common sequence of processes:

(a) An initial period which leads to the experiencing and recognition of a problem which is sufficiently arousing to motivate efforts to solve it.
(b) Second, a period of concentrated effort to solve the problem through routine, readily available, or habitual actions.
(c) Then, with the failure of customary processes to solve the problem, there is an experience of frustration, tension, and discomfort which leads to a temporary withdrawal from the problem.
(d) During this incubation period of withdrawal and distancing from the problem it is perceived from a different perspective and is reformulated in a way which permits new orientations to a solution to emerge.
(e) Next, a tentative solution appears in a moment of insight often accompanied by a sense of exhilaration.
(f) Then, the solution is elaborated and detailed and tested against reality.
(g) Finally, the solution is communicated to relevant audiences.

There are three key psychological elements in this process:

(a) the arousal of an appropriate level of motivation to solve the problem;
(b) the development of the conditions which permit the reformulation of the problem once an impasse has been reached; and
(c) the concurrent availability of diverse ideas which can be flexibly combined into novel and varied patterns.

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14 Chris Argyris, *Integrating the Individual and the Organization*, New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1964, p. 31.

Each of these key elements is subject to influence from social conditions and the personalities of the problem-solvers.[15]

## ANATOMY OF THE SCHOOL BOARD

Certainly the board of education is an important variable in school conflicts, and we have some research evidence that permits some tentative statements regarding the characteristics of school boards in productive-conflict schools. School boards in productive-conflict districts tend to employ superintendents with higher levels of conflict management skills and then give these superintendents wide latitudes of initiative and decision-making authority.[16]

Second, rather than avoiding or repressing conflict, the boards in productive-conflict districts encourage assault on conflict in open board meetings. Although evidently desirable, this open assault on conflict appears to be a difficult and uncommon stance for most boards.[17] Conflict appears to be inherently discomforting to boards of control and administrators, although some individuals, probably a minority, seem to enjoy conflict.

Third, school boards in productive-conflict districts suffer from role ambiguity.[18] Unlike boards in productive-conflict districts, the boards in destructive-conflict districts have not hammered out a clear expression of the role of the board in school affairs. Consequently they frequently fail to separate the policy making from the executive functions, and, more often than the productive-conflict boards, they intrude upon the prerogatives of the superintendent and his professional staff.

Fourth, productive-conflict boards commonly have well-developed policy statements. It has been axiomatic for years that school boards that attempt to operate without well-developed policy statements deserve all the trouble they get.

Fifth, as anyone would guess, the better the communication between the board and the community, the better the conflict profile would appear to be in most instances.[19] Boards in productive-conflict districts know what their communities expect of their schools, they know something about the community's tolerances in school affairs, they know which concerns are of most importance to the people of the community, and they work hard at keeping in close touch with their constituencies. Olson's study revealed that productive-conflict districts are also characterized by good communication between the superintendent and the school board.

Sixth, school boards in productive-conflict districts do not try to represent

15 Deutsch, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21.
16 David W. Minar, *Educational Decision-Making in Suburban Communities: School Board and Community Linkages*, Evanston, Ill.: Department of Political Science and Center for Metropolitan Studies, Northwestern University, 1965.
17 James M. Lipham, Russell T. Gregg, and Richard A. Rossmiller, "The School Board: Resolver of Conflict?," *The Administrator's Notebook*, vol. 17 (April, 1969), p. 3.
18 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
19 Richard F. Olson, "Factors Affecting Understanding Between Superintendents and School Boards," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford, Calif.: School of Education, Stanford University, 1965.

special-interest groups in the community, but rather deal with issues on the basis of their rationale. They tend to focus on the criterion of what is best for students rather than on the partisan preferences of special-interest groups.

Seventh, school boards in productive-conflict districts are characterized by mutual respect among individual board members.

## ANATOMY OF THE ADMINISTRATOR

What does the profile of the productive-conflict administrator look like? Unfortunately we have more speculation and folklore on this question than solid research evidence. Most of the characteristics stated here have been drawn from studies of a relatively small number of principals and superintendents.[20] Thus they should be considered tentative, although they appear to have a great deal of face validity.

First, productive-conflict administrators appear to have well-integrated personalities and enjoy good mental health. Social psychologists theorize that leaders who are at peace with themselves, who understand and accept their own strengths and weaknesses, are most likely to be at peace with others. Self-acceptance appears to be a prerequisite to acceptance of others, which is essential to good interpersonal relations. The greater the psychological health of the administrator, the more he tends to motivate teachers through the personal example he sets and the humanistic responses he exhibits toward others.

Second, the productive-conflict administrator seems to be characterized by a general trust and faith in people. Conversely, the administrator who operates on "the devil theory," who expects the worst in others, is likely to find it through the phenomenon which we have come to know as the self-fulfilling prophecy. His perception of others is often distorted adversely and he helps generate conflicts himself and often becomes part of the problem rather than a force in its solution. As Charles Dickens observed, "It will generally be found that those who sneer habitually at human nature are among its worst examples."

Third, the productive-conflict administrator behaves authentically and openly. He expresses himself freely even at the risk of losing friends. He is not afraid to express genuine approbation as well as anger. He behaves genuinely, and this seems to have a contagious effect on his colleagues, eliciting from them the same genuine behavior which is essential to integrative conflict resolution. Although artificial behavior is often helpful in conflict avoidance, in compromise, and in collective bargaining, it is anathema to integrative resolution.

Fourth, the productive-conflict administrator is adventurous and risk-taking. He is willing to risk criticism of both self and the organization because he knows that creativity and change are impossible without criticism. He also knows that reasoned criticism is the lifeblood of a free and open society. He makes progress, not by avoiding conflict, but by responding to conflict in-

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20 Richard W. Ford, "Psychological Health of Elementary Principals and the Organizational Climate of Schools," Paper presented at AERA Convention, New York, February 4-7, 1971, and Richard Wynn, "Interpersonal Relations in Educational Leadership," Unpublished Ed.D. dissertation, New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1952.

telligently. He may even enjoy conflict, not because of any love for antagonism, but because of his drive to get at issues forthrightly.

Fifth, the productive-conflict administrator is creative and motivates change through intelligent inquiry. Creativity, as we have seen, is an essential hallmark of conflict resolution through integration. He is not devoted to innovation just for the sake of change, but for reasoned innovation with rational justification in response to new demands and circumstances.

Sixth, the productive-conflict administrator seems to have a deep compassion for disadvantaged people. His deep sense of concern for people and his sensitivity to the human condition commits him especially to the have-nots in school and society. This characteristic helps to forge strong support among those most likely to be critical of schools.

Finally, the productive-conflict administrator is much more devoted to strengthening the school district's decision-making processes than in making decisions himself. As Griffiths has noted, he tends to make fewer important decisions himself and sees his role as creating the organization and the climate which will permit the best decisions to emerge from the organization. He knows that, when the organization and climate are right, he has little to fear from the decisions that emerge from the group. He also knows that group decision-making makes him more acceptable to the group, reinforces the group's commitment to the decisions, and creates the very conditions under which conflict is resolved as a vital part of the decision-making process. As one superintendent put it, "To attack the administration of this school system one must attack the entire school system because we are all part of the decision-making process here."

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Administrators who search for a bag of tricks to find their way out of controversy are likely to be disappointed. Enduring resolution of conflict is not so much the result of clever tricks as it is the state of mind of superintendents, boards of education, teachers, students, and citizens and the organizational climate of the schools and community. Some generalizations can be drawn from this analysis of conflict. First, we stressed the importance of viewing conflicts in neutral terms, realizing that the conflict may be good or bad, depending largely but certainly not entirely upon the statesmanship of the school administrator himself. If this principle can be accepted, we can then conclude that the most effective administrators are those who can accept conflict and capitalize upon it to use the unusual leverage which it often presents to move the organization forward more rapidly.

We have suggested that many of the more difficult conflicts arise from goal ambiguity and that the fundamental task is to strive for greater clarification and agreement on the goals of the organization. By reducing goal ambiguity we can reduce many of the conflicts which can arise over means.

The classic outcomes of conflict were examined: avoidance, deadlock, victory-defeat, compromise, and integration. We learned that the last one, integration, is probably least common but most effective over the long run. Al-

though it is not possible to achieve integration in all types of conflict, it can be achieved much more frequently if we but had the wisdom, patience, and creativity to make it work. We considered the difference between fixed-sum and variable-sum problems and between welfare goals and cultural goals and found these differences to be helpful in sorting out those dilemmas that are resolvable by integration and those that are not.

The organizational climate or health appears to predispose an organization toward productive-conflict or destructive-conflict posture; the administrator can influence this climate significantly by his administrative style and values. Characteristics which distinguish productive-conflict climates from destructive-conflict climates were noted. These characteristics include: goal focus, communication adequacy, power equalization, resource utilization, group cohesiveness, morale, innovativeness, autonomy, problem-solving adequacy, and openness in attacking problems. Mutual trust and authentic behavior by boards of education and administrators are also important.

The concept of organizational health and its relationship to organizational conflict is analogous to the concept of an individual's ability to cope with personal conflict as a function of his mental health. One might speak of organization health in terms of applied mental hygiene. It is a crucial concept in increasing a school's capacity to cope with conflict constructively. The mental hygiene of man and his institutions is interactive and contagious. Schools are society in microcosm. Young citizens in a free society can hardly learn how a free society regulates conflict and is strengthened by it unless they can see it happen in their schools.

In these times many people and institutions are not behaving well in quarrels. We can hardly criticize students' misbehavior in conflicts until teachers, administrators, boards, and citizens have become better exemplars of the integration of interacting desires. Society has the right to expect us to behave well in quarrels, and we have the capability of delivering. We are by profession scholars of group process, problem solving, interpersonal relations, organizational climate, humanity, and mental health.

Indeed both the essence and high adventure of school administration in these times may rest more squarely with the civilizing of conflict in our schools than with almost any other definition we can give our work.

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